New Fiction

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called "great" as "Huck Finn" for instance is great, each of these has excellencies far beyond the ordinary.

It is of interest also to note that each is obviously the work of a beginner at the trade. Each book is marked by certain crudities that suggest inexperience; crudities that may easily be overcome. Furthermore it is significant that each of these books is from the South, a section of the country which has until now produced very little of consequence in American literature. Parenthetically, one may add Mrs. Tyler's remarkable novel "Children of Transgression" as evidence of the possible appearance of a newly inspired, vigorous Southern "school" of creative literature. And whereas the wild Western yarn and the analytical story of the life of our own "effete East" are chiefly reminiscent and contemplative, the problems of the South are those of to-morrow as well as of to-day.

Mr. Stribling's story was conceived from the standpoint of the educated mulatto and was placed in Tennessee. Mr. Shands's novel is larger, more broadly conceived, chiefly from the point of view of the sympathetic white man, and its scene is Texas, its negroes of the older plantation type and its white society, in some respects, even more primitive than the cynical folk of the Tennessee story. It also deals openly with the case of a very bad "bad nigger" who ends his career by being burned to death by a mob—a scene, by the way, that can best be characterized by the hackneyed phrase, "Homeric"—simple, direct in its savagery and as inexorably inevitable as any other natural phenomenon—like the eruption of a volcano. But it remains in correct proportion; it is but an incident, and not the most vital one of the story.

In each novel the central point of the whole trouble may be summed up in a single word—miscegenation. The inevitable racial conflicts with all their manifestations are ultimately traceable to just that. In this story the educated colored parson sums it up:

"Where two races continue to live side by side in the same country either the less numerous race is swept aside and dies out, like the Indians, or it is absorbed; it is amalgamated with the other, like the Spaniards in Mexico. . . . They mix till finally there is nothing but the mixture." To which another negro replies: "But white folks and niggers ain't never gwine to mix in no sich way as dat." The parson's answer is that they "have pretty well done it already in some Central and South American countries." More dramatically the case is also stated by a Southern white woman:

"Oh, it's horrible, horrible," said Mrs. Deane, "how we are cursed with these niggers. Everybody calls us savages when we burn the men for outraging white girls, and the (negro) women go on day after day ruining our boys. What are we to do?"

"Well, there's no need to cry about it," said Jasper, senior, "it's an old story. . . . We brought the niggers here and what would we do if we didn't have 'em to work for us?"

Mr. Shand's story is a hard knot of tragedy, a knot that cannot be untied. His conclusion is no finality; no more than a cutting of a minor strand, leaving the whole worse than ever in its tightened tangle. The story ends with the unintentional killing by the Ku Klux Klan of the leading white man, the best loved white man in the county, who is shot during their attempt to seize the negro parson whom he wishes to protect. The final note is one of horror at what they have done—of a suggested realization that lawless violence and revolt is no way out of the tangle. It is a tremendously effective climax, but it is no Aristotelian *katharsis* of the drama. No such cleansing is, in effect, possible.

The plot follows two main lines; the attempts of this leading white man, Will Robertson, to carry on wisely and patiently, to treat the negro justly, but not without sympathy; and the relations of his young son, Bob, with the vicious, dangerous yellow girls, who, however, are also treated understandingly and without too harsh a judgment. The tragedy is inherent in the juxtaposition of the races; the forces that come into play are elemental, as immutable as the ebb and flow of an ocean tide, sure to operate when circumstances afford them room.

There is also a sub-plot, or a parallel illustration, a variant on the main theme, in the case of Thompson, the easy going storekeeper, who has been living openly with a mulatto woman, and who falls a victim to the Ku Klux crusade, one of the banners of which is: "We Want No Mulatto Babies." The thing is told with a grim directness, with no mincing of words—a stark horror. But here, as indeed throughout the book, Mr. Shands is entirely free from any cheap sensationalism. He tells a straightforward story, without any embroideries of diction; it is almost too hard and undecorated, but it makes a startlingly sharp outline. Each scene stands out, lurid, but not exaggerated.

In construction the story is excellent; orderly, well proportioned; its action always inevitably derived and never forced or even hurried. From the standpoint of technique it is even a better work than "Birthright," its only noticeable drawback being a little stiffness, especially at first, in its manner; a tendency to let his people soliloquize a bit unnaturally. These are minor roughnesses that can easily be overcome by practice.

The background of this and the other recent Southern novels is interesting in itself; an oddly primitive society, not out of touch with to-day but nevertheless actually living, for the most part, in the late '70s or '80s of the past century. For one thing, religion as expressed in the church life, the importance of the minister and the part played by the various denominations in the affairs of the community is vastly more important, more vitally a reality, than in any Northern or Western community.

One would like to devote columns to pointing out the incidentally fine things in Mr. Shand's story, and it would be easy to pick scores of quotable passages of importance even out of their context, but it must suffice to advise the discriminating and thoughtful reader to read the book itself. It is not meant primarily to amuse, though merely as an arresting narrative it will hold any one's attention. It is a wholly proper function of creative literature to arouse and stimulate thought, and it can be done without allowing the product to degenerate to the level of a tract or a "medicated" novel. As to that, Mr. Shands has no very precise doctrine to preach—unless it be human kindness, justice and understanding—as his main purpose is to state the basic problem.

This he has done with very great effectiveness. It is not too much to suggest that Mr. Shands has in him the making of a novelist, and perhaps a dramatist, of a very high rank.

DAVID THE SON OF JESSE. By Marjorie Strachey. The Century Company.

IT might be thought a difficult task to retell the story of David—and of Jonathan, Goliath, Bathsheba, Absalom et al.—in such fashion as entirely to remove from it any trace of nobility, of dignity, of ethical significance and of poetry, but Miss Strachey has successfully done just that. It is not merely vulgarized and cheapened; it is entirely transmogrified. Practically the only thing retained from the original version is its dash of what the Victorian moralists call "impropriety," and this is treated throughout with a truly mid-Victorian simper, a turning aside of the head with a leering, Peeping Tom attitude. It is an astonishing performance.

So far as its intent can be made out it appears to have been to present David and his fellow characters with "realism" or simplicity—to picture them not from the historical or mythological standpoint but as everyday, rather modern human folk. There is painstaking avoidance of "fine writing" or of any elevated thought. But the result is very far from being realistic in any sense. One gets rather the impression of a very modern Sunday school society masquerading; boys and girls dressed up in false beards and queer clothes trying to talk like everyday people while pretending also to be "primitive," with the superintendent as David; a rather nasty minded David, wearing a cloak over his black frock coat and patent leather shoes as he goes into battle or arranges a clandestine appointment with Bathsheba. The thing is utterly squeezed dry; not a drop left of the passion or dignity or significance of the original.

A good deal of it becomes a matter of modern back yard gossip, or, to use an American comparison, it is an affair of a lot of evil minded old women in porch rockers on a boarding house veranda talking over that awful story about Bathsheba and other ladies who were no better than they should be. Even the incident of Abishag, the Shunammite maiden, is given with similar modern improvements. We are told that "for a time at least the old man got a little comfort!"

The thing is wholly vicious. It may have some appeal to well meaning, not over intelligent readers to whom it may come as, in some sort, a "Bible story" and therefore guaranteed all right. It is thus capable of doing real harm. It has not the shadow of an artistic excuse.

THE OPPIDAN. By Shane Leslie Charles Scribner's Sons.

MR. SHANE LESLIE needs no introduction, though this is his first appearance as a novelist. As might be expected from his achievement as essayist and critic, the story has a matured excellence, both in its manner and in Mr. Leslie's conception of the problem he has set himself. Regarded merely as narrative fiction, it is sometimes a little heavy footed; one is not quite sure that Mr. Leslie's vocation is that of a *raconteur*, or that he has much of the magic gift that belongs to the "spell of the teller of tales." Yet it moves steadily in an even enough flow. Its chief values, however, lie in its suggestiveness as a study of a great British institution—Eton—an institution which is even more characteristically British than either Oxford or Cambridge, or the Established Church itself.

The real hero of the book is not Peter Darley, nor any of the other boys who serve as subsidiary centers of interest, but Eton College itself. He gives full measure of fine analysis of the problems of adolescence, of the life of the boys with their young tragedies, hopes, crudities, impulses, inhibitions; but it is the mass effect of the whole that counts rather than any separate strand of the entire complex. And therein he is highly successful. It is a living institution that takes shape on his large canvas—too large and too steadily alive to admit of any brief or pointed summation.

It was a hugely difficult task that he set himself. As he admits in his very interesting preface, "the public school canvas is certainly limited. There could be nothing duller than a school novel true to life. Conversation is as restricted among boys as among clerks, and by reason of school slang less intelligible. . . . School life can be totally monotonous and the train of events devoid of plot. Breakage of rules affords perpetual incident and expulsion the occasional tragedy. The only conversation of literary interest is either priggish or Rabelaisian. Character again is more discernible among the masters than boys. The boy is molded to convention and lives in mild terror of being thought quaint, talented, or pious. The school novelist finds it necessary to caricature the worthy masters and to exaggerate the unworthy boys. Incidents which could only occur at intervals have to be brought together in quick succession on the chance of improvising a plot."

Nevertheless Mr. Leslie has avoided most of these obvious pitfalls and is guilty of little distortion or overaccenting, either in dealing with the boys or the masters. If the plot, as a plot, remains a bit artificial it does not at all injure the net result.

It is an Eton entirely of the past that he is describing—of twenty years or so ago. Times have changed, *et nos mutamur in illis.* There is even a touch of the *laudator temporis acti* in his attitude. "The fine old yeoman and county family names," he says, "outdating the peerage, grew scarcer in the school lists, while, unfortunately, financial finesse and Semitic snobbery have too often filled their place." He notes, too, that "as the classics slowly fell from their high estate the literary promise of earlier days in the century was stifled. Etonians like Fielding, Shelley, Hallam, Milman, Kinglake, Leslie Stephen and Swinburne had no successors."

It is also become true to-day that Eton no longer rules the army, though her sons are still strong at Westminster. Looking backward again Mr. Leslie remarks that "Etonians held the two houses of Parliament for their class and not for the people. Eton compromised in every

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